

FARMER CHARACTERISTICS

Timeline of events

1960s

- Sharp decrease in black farm employment, especially in the rural south.
- Average size of farm about 100 acres.

1970s

- Approximately 50% of farm operators and managers have at least a high school education, but only 8% have a college degree.
- Sharp increase in Hispanic farm employment in the west, primarily migrant workers.
- Overall farm employment decreases steadily.
- Average size of farm about 500 acres.

1980s

- Downward trend in farm growth stabilized for a short time.
- Average size of farm over 2000 acres.
- Advent of the personal computer and cellular telephone.
- Computers are used on 20% of US farms.
- Average farm worker income falling below poverty line.
- Black farm management and workers less than 1% of total number of American farmers.
- Hispanic farm management and workers rises to 13% of total number of American farmers; over 37% of farm workers are foreign-born.
- Increased mechanization and technological advances in crop yield, irrigation and chemicals.

1990s

- The Internet.
- Educational attainment rises. Approximately 80% of farm operators and managers have at least a high school education, 14% have a college degree.
- Overall farm employment declined 80% from its number in 1960.
- Computers are used on 83% of US farms; 75% of young farmers use a cellular phone; one-third of all farmers have and use Internet access and E-mail.
- Federal farm subsidy payments threatened in budget cuts.
- Farmers expand into food-processing ventures.
- Less than 25% of the average farmer's income comes from farming.
- Average size of farm over 5000 acres, over 99% of these are still owned by families or family corporations.
- Average age of farm owner rises past retirement age.

Trends

Increased reliance on computer technology for information and management by farm owners will continue to increase. This will lead to less need for farm employees in management areas.

Uncertainties For The Future

Education: A continued increase in unskilled foreign labor will drive the trend in decreasing education further downward. Changes in the U.S. government's policy concerning immigration and illegal aliens may have an impact on this trend. Otherwise, the gap in education between owners/managers and laborers continues to widen.

Diversity: Currently, there is little diversity among owners and managers. Though there is a large number of hispanics in the farm industry, they are primarily found in low-wage unskilled labor. Should the growing demand for organic and all natural foods continue to increase, there may be increased growth in small farm operations. This would allow for the reentry of minorities into the farm manager/owner profession.

Income: Currently, farming constitutes only 2% of a farm owner's source of income; additionally, the average farm labourer's income is below the poverty line. Changes in farm subsidy programs and the U.S. government's policy concerning immigration and illegal aliens may have an impact on this trend. Increased demand for labour could then drive up costs as migrant workers become less available for hire.

Environment/Technology: The demand for organic, all-natural, and environmentally friendly products may lead to an increase in small farm operations around metropolitan areas. This, coupled with advances in communications technology, may increase the number of farmers who commute from a home inside town rather than living on a farm.